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MULTI-AGE GROUPING--ENRICHING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.
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DESCRIPTORS- *AGE GRADE PLACEMENT, ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT, AGE DIFFERENCES, ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, *CLASS ORGANIZATION, *MULTIGRADED CLASSES, *HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING, NONGRADED SYSTEM, EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAMS, UNGRADED CLASSES, UNGRADED ELEMENTARY PROGRAMS,

HETEROGENEOUS MIXTURES OF CHILDREN OCCUR NATURALLY IN PLAY AND IN MANY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES, FOR EXAMPLE, STUDENT COUNCIL MEETINGS, CLUBS, AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS. THESE ACTIVITIES DEMAND THE VARIETY OF AGES, TALENTS, INTERESTS, AND EXPERIENCES REPRESENTED BY THE WHOLE RANGE OF STUDENTS IN A SCHOOL. IT IS QUESTIONED WHETHER ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES WOULD NOT ALSO BE GREATLY ENHANCED BY THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF, AND COOPERATION AMONG, A HETEROGENEOUS GROUP OF STUDENTS LEARNING TOGETHER. THE AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEM AT PRESENT GENERALLY ORGANIZES STUDENTS INTO CLASSES ACCORDING TO AGE. BECAUSE OF THE ABUNDANT RESEARCH DEMONSTRATING THE VAST DIFFERENCES IN ABILITY AND RATE OF DEVELOPMENT WITHIN ANY ONE AGE GROUP, IT IS ARGUED IN THIS PAMPHLET THAT IT IS PERHAPS HIGHLY ARTIFICIAL TO ORGANIZE CLASSROOMS BY AGE ALONE. THE STUDY COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTENT OF THIS PAMPHLET INVESTIGATED BOTH THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MULTI-AGE GROUPING. IN MULTI-AGE GROUPING, CHILDREN ARE GROUPED RANDOMLY WITH NO PARTICULAR CONSIDERATION OF AGE OR ABILITY, ALTHOUGH IT IS RECOGNIZED THAT NOT ALL AREAS OF STUDY ARE AMENABLE TO SUCH GROUPING. BUT FOR THOSE SUBJECTS LIKE ART, CREATIVE WRITING, AND DISCUSSION PERIODS, IN WHICH VARIED LEVELS OF MATURITY, PERSPECTIVE, AND EXPERIENCE CAN CONTRIBUTE MORE TO THE LEARNING PROCESS, THE LEARNING PROCESS WILL BE MORE LIKELY ENRICHED BY A GREATER HETEROGENEITY OF PUPILS. HETEROGENEOUS INTERACTION OF AGE GROUPS CONTRIBUTES TO SOCIAL GROWTH AND UNDERSTANDING AS WELL AS TO ACADEMIC GROWTH. THIS DOCUMENT IS AVAILABLE FROM THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, 1201 SIXTEENTH STREET, N.W., WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 FOR $1.00. (WD)

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Education (E/K/N/E) believes that no educational improvement can take place unless ideas are thoroughly explored by educators.

It is because of this belief that E/K/N/E has published this Bulletin which explores the subject of multi-age grouping — one of many ways to organize an elementary school.

This organizational approach was selected as a Bulletin topic because of the resurgence of interest in multi-age grouping and because of the Department's commitment to keeping its membership informed of new developments in the field of elementary education.

The Bulletin does not represent the Department's official endorsement of multi-age grouping as *the* answer to school organization questions or even as the *best* way to organize every school.

It was prepared to inform and stimulate and encourage a critical examination of the multi-age grouping concept as presented by a special committee of educators who see much value in this approach to organizing children in a school setting.

The Bulletin was produced by a committee with varying interests and backgrounds. Its most effective use in the schools will likewise be achieved by a local committee of educators with varying points of view . . . a committee which, if it accepts the ideas presented here, can use its combined resources to put these ideas into practical effect.

ROBERT GILSTRAP
Executive Secretary and
Director of Publications

A NOTE FROM THE COMMITTEE

Dear Reader:

In the early days of elementary education in America, multi-age grouping was a necessity. The one-room schoolhouse enclosed a multi-age group. For years, Americans traditionally have looked back with nostalgia to the one-room schoolhouse, forgetting its physical shortcomings while remembering the variety of rich, close contacts with others that it offered.

Now, more than a century later, educators are once more getting excited about that pattern of classroom organization. However, their interest now is a matter of choice, not necessity. They see this new-old kind of class organization as a way to provide unity of experiences for the child, combat age-isolation, and create integration. Since there are so many issues now which separate individuals from one another, we believe there is no need for school organization to further the process.

The Committee was formed for the specific purpose of exploring multi-age grouping and writing this report. We believe the value of the report will lie in the critical intelligence which educators will bring to studying it, in the force with which they respond to its ideas, and in the energy with which they use it for enriching the learning environment of boys and girls.

All the members of the Committee have been classroom teachers, have served as principals of elementary schools, and have had varied experiences in curriculum development, supervision, and teacher education. We have long been concerned over certain practices which seem to curtail opportunities for children to profit from richly diverse learning environments.

The Committee met frequently during the past year. We thought aloud, sharing our knowledge and understanding of children and how they learn best. This has been a most rewarding experience, and each of us has grown considerably. Our conviction that multi-age grouping for instruction contributes to the education of children has broadened and deepened.

It is the sincere wish of each member of our Committee that you will be stimulated by the ideas expressed in the Bulletin and that you will join with us in an effort to make it possible for children to flourish in the rich environment of diversity which we believe multi-age grouping provides.

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1

GROUPING IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

Jimmy is seven years old and in the second grade. Although the children in Jimmy's classroom are different in many ways, the school has seen fit to limit the environment of Jimmy and his schoolmates on the basis of age. Yet, when the school day ends and Jimmy boards the big orange bus which takes him home, he leaves behind this "age-determined" school environment.

On the bus he may sit next to

John, a six-year-old first grader who lives up the street. If a seat is available beside Randy, a nine-year-old fourth grader, then Jimmy will leap at the chance to sit there. He may join a group of children whose ages are representative of several grade levels, kindergarten through grade six. Children on school buses don't always organize themselves as the school does.

When Jimmy reaches home, trades school clothes for play clothes, and enters the neighborhood world of play, his possibilities for personal contact are even more diverse. Here they range from playing with his three-year-old sister to occasional contact with the neighborhood teenagers. Neighborhood children at play, like children on buses, do not always group themselves by age or grade level.

Just as Jimmy's playmates are diverse, what he gains from them is equally diverse. At the heels of Randy, his nine-year-old friend, the world of nature has opened up for Jimmy. With Randy he's explored the woods, the field, the creek. He's hunted salamanders, frogs, and tadpoles and, at least for the present, developed a consuming interest in nature.

Randy's world is broader than Jimmy's. In this relationship Jimmy admires someone more able than he and accepts himself for what he is able to do. Because Jimmy can participate in Randy's broader world, his horizons have been extended.

Jimmy's role with his younger sister and the little boy next door is different. With them he is usually in the dominant position. He learns to teach, to lead, to be patient and understanding, to have compassion for those less able. Certainly these are not finished characteristics in seven-year-old Jimmy, but in this setting these aspects of his personality are being shaped.

So Jimmy learns some things from "big kids" and teaches other things to "little kids." The diversity of age levels of the children to whom he has access serves as a great resource in his environment.

Would you agree that what Jimmy learns from his friends, older and younger, is important to his development? Would you agree that this

learning may be just as important — even more important — than what he learns inside his classroom?

"Granted," you may say, "but this in no way lessens the importance of what he can and should learn and is learning in the classroom."

We agree. However, we ask if the school, being a microcosm of life, could not become more lifelike in its provisions for learning opportunities? Just as Jimmy both learns and teaches in his life outside school, could he not profitably do the same inside school?

You may well ask, "What about our student councils and our safety patrols? Our cafeteria and playground? Through these don't the schools provide the lifelike situations for learning that you have been talking about? Aren't these opportunities for multi-age interaction and learning?"

Indeed they are. But don't these examples tend to prove our point? If valuable in these instances, why not in the academic areas?

"But what about grade levels in reading and in arithmetic? What about the entire graded structure now in operation in most of our schools? What effect would multi-age grouping have on these?"

The answer is straightforward: These artificial groupings would be eliminated. Already this is an accomplished fact in some schools which have nongraded primaries and, in some cases, entirely nongraded programs.

"Easier said than done!"

Not necessarily — and the purpose of this Bulletin is to make that doing easier. It sets forth the values on which the nongraded, multi-age concept of learning experiences is based and details practical ways in which this concept can be initiated in your school, either as a new program or as an extension of already existing ones. Armed with this information and with a commitment to better education for children, it's up to you to do the rest.

2

VALUES OF MULTI-AGE GROUPING

Psychologists tell us that the one human push from conception to death is to be and to become — to grow and to develop in keeping with new powers developed at successive levels of our life cycle. Not all children, or even any two children, reach the same level of being and becoming at any one time. So the school's expectations for each child must be based on the child as an individual, rather than as a part of a group. The school, then, must

accept the uniqueness of each child and must find a way to offer diverse learning opportunities with multiple outcomes. The activities within these opportunities must, however, be within the range of a particular child's capacity, maturity, and interests. Individual differences dictate individualized learning.

Aside from his studies, each child learns through social interaction. Here, also, individual differences prevail. Here, also, the school must provide a rich and varied social environment for learning. Groupings must be flexible enough to ensure that each child contributes to and benefits from interaction with many different personalities. It is these personalities who stimulate and challenge his thinking, encourage him to "try out" roles to establish his identity. It is with these personalities that the child can identify. It is with them that he finds security in common interests and learning activities in keeping with his own stage of development. The ages of his companions may vary from his own. They may encompass a variety of maturity levels, depending on the particular learning activity of any given time. In these varied groupings, the child may be one of the older members or one of the younger, the most or the least knowledgeable.

A child's education can in this way be fashioned for him and around him, keeping in mind who he is, what his needs are, and the potential he has. Every school can provide a setting in which the child may learn as rapidly as he can, without hurrying or being hurried, or as slowly as he needs, without fear of failure, shame, or discouragement. In such a setting, each child can learn successfully and enjoy consideration as a worthy person whose contributions are received with dignity and appreciation.

Of course, when children arrive at school the first day, the school must make some arrangements so that they can hang up their coats, put away their personal belongings, and make their presence known for attendance. When the business of learning begins, some who work with children think it necessary to group them by age, grade, ability — some common factor. Experience and research have shown that these "common factors" are imaginary. Within the grouping are hidden a

multitude of differences in the children's needs, interests, and performance levels. Some educators, furthermore, point out that many values are lost by imposing on children artificial limitations.

In some schools, extracurricular activities contribute to a natural mixing of ages. Let's look at some actual situations we have observed in schools which involve multi-age grouping and examine the values that emerge.

Situation: *The elementary school safety council we visited was composed of representatives from every class. The council had scheduled a series of meetings to study school accidents. The older children made charts to illustrate unsafe practices. The younger children coined slogans to go with the charts. Later, all the children in the council together put on a special assembly program to help stop the spread of accidents. The older children showed slides of dangerous activities and explained how these activities could be made accident-proof. Younger children recited original safety poems. The youngest showed safety charts and explained their slogans.*

Values: Are there values to children when they study common problems? Isn't this a realistic experience for children, who, as adults, will have to work cooperatively with others? If so, then why do we, in America, have such a cleavage of age groups, such a generation gap, when collaboration of efforts and ideas from young and old would unify attitudes and help to eliminate antagonisms? Surely problems of our society must be attacked by combining the thinking of multi-age groups, rather than by separating and pitting one against the other. Safety, health, crime, smog, littering are problems contributed to by all age groups and must be attacked by multi-aged thinking. Schools, by grade and age segregation, give little opportunity for the interaction of children of many ages and as a result perpetuate a pecking-order based on age.

Situation: *The elementary school council — also composed of representatives from every class — met to consider the effect of such*

things as manners in the cafeteria, nutrition, and school safety on the school. Afterwards, each representative went back to his classroom to lead a discussion. At the next council meeting which we attended each representative reported the suggestions of his classmates on how undesirable behavior could be lessened. These suggested rules from each grade became school-wide policy.

Values: Do children in multi-age groups experience more cooperation than competition? Is it possible that when the age range is narrowed, more competitive behavior occurs?

Situation: *In one school where two lunch periods were required, the staff decided not to separate the younger and older children during lunch. After mixing older children with younger ones in each lunch period, a great many examples of cooperation, helpfulness, instruction, and pleasant interaction were observed by the committee.*

Values: Does multi-age grouping create a social environment in which more opportunities arise for certain desired kinds of social behavior to occur? Does this type of situation affect the attitudes of children toward social behavior appropriate for various ages?

Situation: *Several members of the Service Corps (9- to 11-year-old children) were returning from the playground of the five- and six-year-olds where they had been teaching little ones to play jacks, jump rope, bat balls, and learn similar skills. Some of their comments we overheard follow: "Tommy really is trying to hit the ball. He won't give up trying." "Sometimes the boys and girls change the rules of the game, but when they find out their rules don't work, they go back to the 'real rules.'" "Each day I get more girls to learn to jump rope. They watch and help each other." "You know, I like teaching them. I want to be a teacher when I grow up."*

Values: Is there opportunity for youngsters to gain more insight into human striving, conniving, initiating, imitating when they are involved

in activities with other children of varying ages? Aren't children more objective in analyzing the behavior of others in situations such as the ones just described?

Situation: *Mike, the safety patrol boy in charge of kindergarten children, was fun to observe. He reminded us of the Pied Piper! As he waited for all to gather outside his school, he'd tell a funny story. Then the children would form a line and march up the hill to cross the street, singing a song he had taught them. Occasionally he'd pass out mints bought with his limited allowance.*

Values: Doesn't every boy enjoy being a hero? Isn't it natural for little ones to seek out an older child for hero-worship? Should growing up include the practice and acquisition of human skills of helpfulness, concern, and giving?

The vignettes just cited grew out of the "multi-ageness" which extracurricular activities allow for. The rewards are in building appreciation for others, self-respect, and habits of helpfulness and cooperation.

But what about learning experiences within the classroom walls? What is the possibility of improving the learning situation through multi-age grouping as opposed to graded grouping?

The answers have long been delayed because of different trends in the thinking of educators. In grouping chronologically into grades, teachers and principals have been concerned about facilitating academic progress through what they assume to be sequentially organized skills and concepts. Perhaps this concern is needless.

Both simple observation and sophisticated data-gathering procedures confirm that individuals do not move through learning step by step, much less through any particular arrangement of steps in an order true for all children.

However, some educators believe children should move through clearly defined sequences at their own rates. They use a nongraded pattern to provide teaching groups that are more homogeneous. Chil-

dren are classified by reading achievement into multi-aged groups in which reading age is the common factor.

The nongraded class with ability groupings still offers great variety in the interests and skills within the so-called homogeneous group since children vary in their rates of learning, patterns of learning, styles of learning, and motivation for learning.

In a recent survey of research on grouping as related to pupil learning, Franseth and Koury conclude that "except in a limited sense and for short periods of time, success in organizing children according to ability is probably an unrealistic expectation especially in the elementary school." They also state that "the evidence appears to support the conclusion that children may learn more from those who are different than from those who are similar."

If homogeneity is a myth, then why chase after it? The consequences can be serious. Any grouping which encourages a teacher to teach children as though they are all nearly alike can defeat attempts to practice the most important principle of learning: *each individual must be accepted for himself, for his own uniqueness.*

When we set rigid standards for regulated sequences of growth, we demand a conformity which many children find impossible to attain; for others, the standards are not challenging enough.

Some schools avoid adherence to inappropriate standards by organizing multi-aged classes where teachers allow individuals to learn at their own best rates. Children, regardless of age or level of performance, are encouraged to do independent research on topics that interest them. Self-selected activities and exploratory learning occur without conformity to grade expectations, but with the greatest possible strides toward goals unique for each individual.

While such highly motivated learning activities occur, the teacher moves among smaller groups or individuals and assists in clarifying meanings, purposes, plans and gives individual instruction for the improvement of skills.

Here are some situations which illustrate how older and younger children work together in an instructional setting. This time let's look at all the situations and then discuss the inherent values.

Instructional Situations: *At one elementary school some 10- and 11-year-old children wrote down stories as dictated by six- and seven-year-old youngsters. Some of the older children's reactions we recorded follow:*

TOM: *"Sometimes they get stuck and I have to help them over the hump. I find the best way is to read the story back to them and say, 'What do you think should come next?' "*

STEPHANIE: *"It takes time for them to get the hang of telling stories, but after they do it once it's always easier the second time. I tell them, 'You should have a story of your own. Why don't you tell about a place you have been?' It's always easier to get a story before or after a holiday; they have something real to talk about. They may exaggerate, but I think that's all right."*

BILL: *"It's a real good feeling when they learn your name and call you when they pass you in the hall."*

CHANG: *"It did bother me that one girl always told a story about a rabbit or some other animal. So I brought in my sister's doll, and, you know, she told a wonderful story about it."*

SCOTT: *"They have the most trouble ending the story, but so do we."*

These same children, as part of their class work, decided to write books especially designed for the younger children. They worked out plots they thought would interest their younger schoolmates, included plenty of lively conversations to hold their interest, drew illustrations for every page, and, finally, bound them sturdily in decorated bindings.

Afterwards, the children held an authors' party. Each set up a booth advertising his latest "best seller." While punch was served and music played in the background, the younger children went from booth to booth, talking to the authors, leafing through their works, and even collecting their autographs.

At one point in the party, the largest boy sat in a rocking chair and read to a young admirer on his lap.

A group of 70 children of various ages occupied a big double room in their school. One of the rooms had taken on all the signs of a science lab. Small groups of the students studied such things as plants, communications, magnets, electricity, and rocks. A teacher was there all the time to help each of the groups, providing them with books or filmstrips or other materials.

One of the groups set up a display on magnetism and electricity, complete with labels and diagrams. A six-year-old worked the display board, making and breaking the electrical circuit and ringing bells. An eight-year-old stood by to explain the process to the children from other groups studying other problems.

A group of children sat at a classroom table. Martin, 10, demonstrated a weather experiment for the others. Mary, 9, Tommy, 8, and Ray, 6, each proceeded to write a report of the experiment using words listed on a chart. When Ray had difficulty picking out the word he needed, the other children helped.

Paul, 7, loved to read, especially with the older boys in this class. Often they would read a story together, alternating the pages. The teacher, curious about his "grade level" in reading, tested him. Paul had no trouble comprehending the complex concepts and style of a basal reader — for "grade" six.

Values: Don't older children gain security from contact with younger ones, seeing them in the less mature stages through which they themselves have recently passed? Without this contact doesn't each new generation miss a valuable opportunity to learn of the continuousness of growth and thereby greatly gain in emotional maturity?

In multi-age groups each youngster can achieve his developmental tasks in a world of varied task attainment. He can see himself moving from a less mature stage to more mature patterns of behavior.

For too long we have sliced knowledge horizontally and assumed that each age or grade group could only take one step at a time — one year for each step. And all this time the knowledge explosion has multi-

plied the amount of learning necessary to understand today's world, not to mention tomorrow's! New and vivid communications have brought the world within the homes of our children to the point that some come to school far too learned for some of the prescribed units of work. The teacher of an elementary multi-age group can take advantage of the possibilities presented as she listens to the marvelous intercommunication of older and younger children.

In a multi-age classroom, day by day, each year, individuals work at their own pace on their own interests and no one has to wait a year to learn what he is anxious to know *now*. Soon the young ones are exploring with older children and the older ones are identifying more complex problems for their independent pursuit.

Values of the multi-age approach show up in almost each event of the day in every learning situation. These values inhere in the child's development and provide an atmosphere of such positive growth that self-concepts for each child cannot help but be good.

And what of the skills! It is amazing how much children can learn from other children when there is freedom to learn. Our observations and experience with multi-age grouping have made this very clear.

Certainly there is enough evidence to affirm the value of multi-age grouping for instructional purposes until we can venture into even newer ways of organizing our schools. The research studies listed in the "Selected Resources for Further Study" and the personal experiences of the committee members provide ample support for this approach to grouping children in an elementary school.

3

INITIATING MULTI-AGE GROUPING

What would happen if as the children arrived for the first day at your school they were counted off in sets of 30 and each set assigned to a room?

(We could assume that they walked in with their friends and would be in compatible groups. There would be older children to help the younger children. The arrangement would be lifelike and natural, not school-like and regimented.)

As each group of 30 children enters your classroom, each child attaches his name to a magnet and places it on a magnetized board in a row with others; the roll is taken! Coats are hung with older children helping younger ones; milk and lunch money are collected by an appointed older child while the teacher is on hand to converse, answer questions, and welcome the residents of the classroom community.

Then all those children interested in a study of woodland animals gather in the room designated for such a study and filled with rich resources to satisfy the curiosity and achievement levels of the children, whatever their age, interested in this topic.

Similarly, since the whole school is engaged in a study of the earth, each boy and girl finds the appropriate room in which to pursue study of his or her chosen topic — whether it be oceanography, atmosphere, land forms, chemical change, or man himself.

From this time on, rich learning in multi-age groupings progresses throughout the day and throughout the year.

Too idealistic? We think not, for many schools are already practicing multi-age grouping for instruction and finding the results most rewarding for children and teachers.

"But how can a school staff translate the theory of multi-age grouping presented in preceding pages into the practical specifics of the school and win the acceptance of both students and community?"

A good question that can be answered in a variety of ways!

Perhaps as a result of reading this Bulletin, a group of teachers will organize a discussion group to consider a multi-age program in their school. Perhaps a group of parents interested in this approach to grouping children will take the initiative and plan a PTA program on the topic. Or perhaps outside events will force the initiative as in the following series of incidents which took place in the school of one of the committee members.

In this Maryland school a budget cut forced the staff to reassess school organization. The budget cut did not force on them any one

solution, however. The principal and teachers were allowed to make a choice from many alternatives.

Here's their story as told by the principal:

"Our school for some time had operated with a classroom teacher staff of 13 — one kindergarten teacher and two teachers each for grades one through six. There was also a part-time general resource teacher. The school was organized in the graded, self-contained classroom pattern. Average class size was 30.

"For several years, however, the student population of the school had been slowly but steadily dropping because homeowners remained in the school area after their children had gone on to secondary schools. There were not enough newcomers with young children to offset this loss.

"The staff recognized that some reduction in its numbers would ultimately be necessary if the trend continued, but chose to 'think about that tomorrow.' Tomorrow came. In a new budget, the staff was reduced by one. And there seemed to be little doubt that further reductions were ahead.

"How could the staff prepare not only for this current reduction, but for those ahead? In early January, shortly after the new budget came out, the staff decided to meet frequently to prepare for the following year. We considered such things as enlarging classes, creating a combination class of two grades, switching to a nongraded primary, or going completely ungraded. At one faculty meeting, I introduced the multigrade idea and recorded the following discussion:

PRINCIPAL: In previous meetings we've considered several kinds of reorganization to permit efficient operation next year. But there's one method, closely allied to the others and yet different, that might give you and your students more freedom. I'm talking about a multi-grade organization in which children of several ages and grades are grouped together. Any reactions to this approach? What do you see as advantages and disadvantages?

GENERAL RESOURCE TEACHER: Well, to me, the purpose comes first. The question should not be how to continue efficient operation with one less teacher or how to maintain classroom quality while short-staffed. The question should be how to *improve* the quality of instruction — how to *improve* education for the boys and girls in school even while our resources are diminishing.

PRINCIPAL: This meeting is exploring that question as have previous meetings. Nobody here, I'm sure, is content with what we've been doing. All of us want to improve education in this school as much as we can. That's why we're discussing this matter.

GRADE 3 TEACHER: I've been in schools where older children were grouped with younger ones, but they were all on the same reading level. And the older children were very embarrassed. They felt ashamed to be with the "little kids." And the things they were interested in were very different. I think this multi-age grouping idea is interesting, but I wouldn't use it for basic reading. I would suggest using it for shared activities such as older children putting on a play, giving a choral reading, or something like that for classes of younger children.

PRINCIPAL: I'm talking about multi-age grouping across the board where all children in a number of grades would be put together, but not on the basis of intelligence or reading level or anything else. The older children wouldn't be ashamed. There'd be no shame attached to it — everyone would be in multi-age groups.

GENERAL RESOURCE TEACHER: You are talking about multi-age grouping for instruction, then, not just for, say, sharing activities?

PRINCIPAL: Well, at the moment I'm groping. And I want to consider every reasonable possibility, whether it's an informal sharing of activities or a formal classroom session.

GRADE 6 TEACHER: Before I came here, I worked in a combination fifth and sixth grade, and I can see some advantages in the multigrade organization. In one class, for example, I had a number of girls who didn't know how to knit. There was a long list of girls who wanted me to show them how. But some of the girls had already learned at home and were proud to be able to teach their classmates. Now learning to knit doesn't have anything to do with age, but I can see where older children, as generally more experienced, could help the younger ones quite a bit.

GRADE 4 TEACHER: I think tutoring projects have proved that, already. And something else besides. In Chicago there's a tutoring program which was originally started by college students. But now there are high school students in the program who teach younger children. And, according to what I've read, the grades of the participating high school kids are going up and up. Another advantage, I think, is that it's much easier for a child to take directions from another child than it is to take those same directions from a teacher.

GRADE 5 TEACHER: I think it would be good from another angle. The younger children would have someone older in school

to look up to, and they'd learn what to expect of themselves when they reached that age and what the teacher would expect of them.

PRINCIPAL: Consider this, too! In a multi-age classroom, the students would stay with the teacher for more than one year. What do you think of that?

GRADE 1 TEACHER: With some of my kids, I couldn't stand it. Neither could they. I think that might be OK with some children and some teachers. But I think the children, especially, need some kind of escape clause. When teacher and student just don't get along, the student should be able to move to another class if he wishes. Since we have 13 teachers here in kindergarten through sixth grade, grouping children into a number of random groups would give any unhappy children plenty of room for transfer.

PRINCIPAL: What are some of the difficulties you foresee in going into a plan like this?

GRADE 2 TEACHER: First, we'd all have to be sold on it, then the parents, not to mention the school board. If we're not "gung-ho" about the plan — I mean really ready to go all out — it could be a disaster. Of course, the parents could really raise hob if they weren't approached right. I think the children would like it.

PRINCIPAL: Any other comments? If not, we'll continue our discussion next week.

"At a later meeting, the staff agreed that the number of students anticipated for grades five and six marked these two levels as those in which any change could best be made but left the details to the teachers involved. Accordingly, the teachers at these two grade levels continued to work with me to determine the kind of change in organi-

zation. They decided they'd like to try a modified multi-grade approach.

"At the PTA executive committee meeting in late January, I informed the members of the situation and our plans. The committee, too, felt that the fifth and sixth grades were the logical groups with which to work and liked the approach we were taking. Next, the entire matter was discussed with some 75 to 100 parents at the February PTA meeting.

"In May, I used the medium of the PTA newsletter to explain our plans once more to the parents. I told them that the faculty decision was to organize one or more combination classes at the fifth/sixth-grade level with the teachers working in a team. I promised that before school opened in the fall they would receive more definite information.

"In late August when the teachers involved returned from vacation, they agreed that the fifth/sixth-grade children would be distributed heterogeneously among three combination 'homeroom' classes. At other times during the day, the children might be switched from the homerooms for specific purposes. Multi-age grouping, for example, would be retained for language arts at the beginning of each day. Grouping according to achievement would characterize the mathematics program. Grouping by grade level would be used for social studies and science because of the requirements of the county that certain courses be taught in certain grades, such as American History in the fifth grade and Cultures of the Past in the sixth grade.

"The general resource teacher was assigned half-time to the school, and I worked part time with the three fifth/sixth-grade classroom teachers in a team-teaching arrangement. A week before school opened, the teachers and I sent a letter to all parents of fifth/sixth-grade children informing them of the arrangement. The second week of school, these parents attended a special meeting to receive further information about the new program.

"The first day of school and, indeed, the entire school year passed without a word of criticism about the arrangement from parents to either myself or the teachers. In the end, we looked forward with less anxiety to the possibility of further staff reductions. We had proved

that the new plan was administratively workable, publicly acceptable, but best of all educationally sound for our children. And the boys and girls agreed."

Initiating multi-age grouping, no matter what the procedure, is naturally no panacea, no magic formula for turning base metal into gold. There are too many other factors involved — the talent of teachers and administrators, buildings, budget, support from the parents — to name a few.

But this is true of initiating any new educational plan for organization. That's why the following questions must be asked — and answered — by you and your staff before making a change to multi-age grouping or any other plan:

- Why consider a new approach to organizing your school? What's the goal?
- What alternative approaches are there for reaching your goal?
- Which is the best one for your school and for your students?
- Where can you get supporting data for this plan?
- Can the plan be put into effect with little disruption of the school and community?
- How can you and your staff help the community understand the values of this plan for the instruction of children?

The last question listed needs some elaboration as it may represent one of the foremost concerns of a staff. Parents are naturally concerned that their children receive the best possible school experience. If school is going to vary markedly from what they have been used to, then they want to be informed of the specifics of these changes. Time spent by a staff in interpreting to the public the objectives and procedures of multi-age grouping will pay dividends in support and enthusiasm.

A principal concerned with the education of the youth of his community and a staff which shares this commitment are the basic ingredients in creating public readiness for the multi-age approach. Their feelings toward and knowledge of the way children live and learn naturally should allow them to understand that there are different ways of grouping and working with children than the present structure.

4

THE ADVANTAGES OF MULTI-AGE GROUPING

Multi-age grouping doesn't solve all of education's problems. It doesn't automatically change the attitudes of teachers, principals, or parents. It doesn't automatically change the philosophy and policies of the school.

But multi-age grouping — probably the most natural and lifelike way of organizing children for formal learning — does have many built-in advantages over traditional grouping patterns.

Multi-age grouping —

Enhances children's flexibility of thought, continuity of learning, creativeness of expression, inventiveness of ideas, openness to new experience, and sensitivity to others.

Provides an environment in which young children can identify with someone older; where older children have the opportunity to help others.

Ensures in any classroom wide diversity of experiences and interests on which the teacher can build learning.

Helps children see themselves, at any age, as part of the full tapestry of life, not as separate, age-isolated, and unimportant.

Provides opportunities for children to move through the roles of both follower and leader.

Helps the teacher function as something more than a director of learning. The teacher becomes the director of an education laboratory in which the children themselves do the exploring and experimenting and finding. The teacher becomes a diagnostician and consultant to each child, assessing his learning, listening to his ideas, helping him think through his problems, and making suggestions.

Multi-age grouping helps create a climate for continuous learning on the part of both teachers and students.

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Filmstrip

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Schools

The principals at the following schools have agreed to respond to your inquiries about multi-age grouping as it is conducted in their buildings.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND:

Montgomery Knolls Elementary School
807 Daleview Drive, Silver Spring
Principal: *Tom Peters*

Parkside Elementary School
Brunet and Silkirk Avenues, Silver Spring
Principal: *Inez Mehrens*

Rosemary Hills Elementary School
Sundale and Porter Drive, Silver Spring
Principal: *John Mohr*

WILMINGTON, DELAWARE:

Charles B. Lore School
4th and Woodlawn Ave.
Principal: *Wesley H. Carlson*

SHEBOYGAN, WISCONSIN:

James Madison Elementary School
2302 David Ave.
Principal: *James Larson*

POSTSCRIPTS

FROM THE COMMITTEE

Much more could have been written in this Bulletin about multi-age grouping, about its advantages and its potentialities. If we aroused your interest and caused you to want to know more, we have achieved our purpose. A postscript from each member of the Committee follows:

Why not begin talking with your co-workers about multi-age grouping? Your principal, I am sure, would be pleased to work with a group of teachers who are interested in learning more about ways of providing a richer learning environment for children.

John P. Causey
Committee Chairman

The great adventure of multi-age grouping starts with you. It is not necessary that children who share the same birth year have their contacts limited to each other when they are so different in every other way. Wonderful, unexpected things happen when children interact with those of other ages.

On the practical side, you could borrow a few older children and a few younger ones from other classrooms. Plan an open-ended activity designed for many levels of achievement, and each child will do his share with his own brand of expertise. Some children will seek the help of friends; others will offer help. When a younger child rises to the occasion, he may stand taller than ever before, because he's reaching toward his hero. You, too, will stand tall.

Marie De Carlo

The educational opportunities for boys and girls in any given school improve in proportion to the willingness of the school staff to look at new ideas and ways of doing things. Multiage grouping seems to me to be an idea which has promise. I hope this bulletin helps you in translating the idea into a better program in your school.

Glen Hoods

Some of us have just participated in a summer school (1967) where children were organized for learning on a multi-age basis. It works! It really does! Children and teachers were equally excited about the outcomes of the undertaking. Try it!

Ruth Gue

As one who has worked with children of all ages, multi-age grouping seems to me a most promising organizational pattern, ensuring development of those values so inherent in our democratic way of life. If one accepts this point of view, working to achieve a multi-age program is worthy of our very best efforts. Good luck to you in your endeavors with this idea.

Lucy K. Behrens

This bulletin touches on some of the possible ways in which multi-age grouping provides better educational opportunities for children. I am sure that while reading it you have thought of many other ways. Dare to dream and dare to do!

Thomas R. Peters

PHOTO CREDIT

Photography and Art by Michael McGurk
All photos are of multi-age classes in Montgomery County, Maryland.